



# Trabajo Fin de Grado

## The Power of the Color Spectrum: The Case of Halle Berry and Viola Davis

*Autor/es*

Alexandra Golab

*Director/es*

Juan Antonio Tarancón de Francisco

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras  
2015

## **Abstract**

The Hollywood film industry has been dominated primarily by white men. It is for this reason that African-American actresses have been the most underrated segment in cinema. Besides, their characterization has followed specific stereotypical conventions that presented them in denigrating terms. The main purpose of this dissertation is to examine the relationship of the color skin and the physical features with the roles African-American actresses play in mainstream films. In particular, this essay compares the roles of two contemporary actresses, Halle Berry and Viola Davis. Both are of a similar age and started their careers at approximately the same time, but they have slightly different skin color and physique and the roles they have played so far are significantly different. Their characterization borrows from the various black stereotypes that have been conceived of through history and from constraining western beauty ideals. For this reason, I take into account the intermingling histories of racism and sexism in the United States to provide an understanding of the ways in which inequality is perpetuated at the present time.

## **Resumen**

La industria de Hollywood ha estado dominada principalmente por hombres de raza blanca. Por esa razón, las actrices afroamericanas son el segmento más infravalorado en el cine. El propósito de este trabajo es examinar la relación entre el color de la piel y los rasgos físicos por un lado y los personajes que las actrices afroamericanas han interpretado en el cine comercial. En particular, este trabajo compara los casos de dos actrices contemporáneas, Halle Berry y Viola Davis. Las dos tienen una edad similar y comenzaron su carrera aproximadamente al mismo tiempo, sin embargo tanto la tonalidad de su piel como su físico son marcadamente distintos y los papeles que han

interpretado en el cine también han sido distintos. Su caracterización se ha basado en mayor o menor medida en los estereotipos a través de los cuales ha representado a los afroamericanos durante décadas y en un ideal de belleza occidental. Por esta razón, se ha partido de las historias de racismo y sexismo que subyacen en la cultura estadounidense para determinar las formas en que la discriminación por razón de raza y sexo se perpetúa en la actualidad.

## Table of contents

I.	Introduction	5
II.	The influence of the skin color	8
III.	Blaxploitation and the redefinition of black stereotypes	12
IV.	The new black wave	16
V.	The case of Halle Berry	19
VI.	The case of Viola Davis	23
VII.	Conclusion	27
VIII.	Works cited	28
IX.	Films cited	32

## **I. Introduction**

African-American women must be one of the most underrepresented groups in the history of Hollywood cinema. In fact, they face a double underrepresentation, both as women and as black. Not only have they been conspicuously absent from the big screen or cast in minor, condescending roles, but they have also been barred from working behind the camera. Since its very beginnings, the Hollywood film industry has been dominated by white male producers, writers, directors and executives (Smith 2013: 780; Covington 2010: 21) that have tended to empower their own race and perpetuate established gender hierarchies.

In 2013 the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA carried out a study of the top 200 Hollywood films and found that 74.7 per cent of the leading characters are male while only 25.3 per cent were female. If the focus is on race, it turns out that 83.3 per cent are white while racial minorities add up to a mere 16.7 per cent. If we look behind the camera, we find that 93.7 per cent of the directors are male and only 6.3 per cent are female, 82.2 per cent are white and only 17.8 per cent belong to racial minorities. Therefore, we can conclude that, in the Hollywood film industry, there is structural, widespread racial and gender inequality.<sup>1</sup>

The discrimination African-American women face in Hollywood is not limited to figures. They have often been cast in a series of stereotypical roles that have tended to undermine their social advancement, most notably, the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Sapphire, or the Savage. Stereotyping is not per se a discriminating activity. It simply refers to the creation of simplified categories through which we make sense of the world around us. Problems arise when a group takes itself as the measure according to which

---

<sup>1</sup> Similar analyses can be found in “Race/Ethnicity in 600 Popular Films: Examining On and Behind the Camera Diversity” (Smith et al. 2014) and “Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Contemporary Hollywood Films and Struggles Over Racial Representation” (Smith 2013).

racial differences are evaluated. As Charles Ramírez Berg observes in the case of Latinos and Latinas (2009: 14), stereotyping describes a “value-neutral psychological mechanism that creates categories and enables people to manage a swirl of data presented to them from the environment.” However, these “value-neutral” stereotypes eventually evolve into value-laden categories with either positive or negative meanings. Most of the stereotypes have a negative connotation, and this, Ramírez argues, has to do with two main mechanisms: ethnocentrism and prejudice. Ramírez describes ethnocentrism as the “view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled or rated with reference to it,” and prejudice as “judging Others as innately inferior based on ethnocentrically determined difference” (2009: 14-15). Like Latino or Arabic people, African-Americans in general and African-American women in particular, are often seen as dirty, uncivilized, unintelligent and untrustworthy because of their darker skin color. The consequences are far reaching and have real material consequences for ethnic minorities. Stereotypes promote the idea that African-Americans do not evolve, that they are immobile in a mobile world, thus justifying the perpetuation of imbalanced power relations. Some of the main conduits through which these negative stereotypes are propagated are the media and popular culture. In the case of African-American women, stereotypes differ according to their skin tone and facial features. This dissertation aims to inquire into how the different skin color and physical features of two renowned contemporary African-American actresses like Halle Berry and Viola Davis might have determined the course of their careers in Hollywood, both the roles they have been offered and the way they have been portrayed.

Both actresses are of a similar age – Halle Berry was born in 1966 and Viola Davis was born in 1965 – and both rose to stardom in the 1990s. However, their acting

careers are quite different. While Halle Berry, whose features resemble the Caucasian race, is perceived as a younger woman, is sexualized and is cast in a variety of roles, Viola Davis, whose features are associated with African-American people like darker skin and a broad nose, is thought to be older, is not sexualized and the roles she is cast in are limited to a limited number of characters. Therefore, the main purpose of this essay is to examine the ways in which an ethnic bias against racialized women still underlies the Hollywood film industry. Although narrative and aesthetic issues cannot be disengaged from how films interact with society, my concerns are not simply textual. Rather, I will focus on the cultural and social impact of films. First, to get a better sense of the cultural context within which the characterization of African-American actresses is understood, I will briefly consider how black features have been dealt with in popular culture and the ways mainstream cinema has both rested on and perpetuated black stereotypes. In addition, I will examine the ways racism and sexism tend to intertwine in United States society. Then, the essay moves on to discuss how some women are granted certain privileges both within the African-American community and in society at large depending on the tone of their skin. Finally, I will analyze how all this is manifested in contemporary Hollywood films by considering the particular cases of Halle Berry and Viola Davis. In particular I will analyze the films *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001) and *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2010). For the most part I will argue that, although the situation of African-American women in the United States has improved enormously during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the casting and characterization of black actresses in mainstream films reveal the expansion of other, more subtle forms of racism and alert us to latent conflicts.

## II. The influence of the skin color

In her essay "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?," Alice Walker coined the term "colorism" to refer to the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their skin color" (1983: 290). Although race and skin color are inextricably woven together in culture and society, colorism reveals yet another reality. While color is a characteristic used to categorize people into a racial classification (Jones 2000: 1487), skin color discrimination, Margaret L. Hunter argues (2002: 238-9), arose when slavery was introduced in the New World and it is still maintained by white-dominated institutional structures.

Slave owners developed a color hierarchy in their plantations. Light-skinned slaves had a few more privileges, they were preferred for domestic tasks inside the house while dark-skinned ones were sent to work in the fields, which was undoubtedly a harder labor (Hunter 2007: 237, 239; Hunter 2002: 177; Patton 2006: 28).<sup>2</sup> Often, light-skinned slaves were the offspring of the relationship between white masters and slave women, which also accounts for the privileges they enjoyed – for example, if they were lucky enough, the master would even free them.

After the abolition of slavery in 1865, skin color hierarchy remained very deeply grounded in the social structure of the United States. Light-skinned African-Americans were looked upon with less mistrust and were more easily accepted into white society; they not only had better job opportunities but were more likely to be hired for white-collar jobs. Skin-color categorization did not only function interracially – that is, when African-Americans were labeled by a member of another race – but also intraracially – when African-Americans categorized themselves (Jones 2000: 1498). This general

---

<sup>2</sup> A similar argument can be found in Hill (2002: 79), Okazawa-Rey et al. (1986: 92) and Coard et al., (2001: 2256-2257).



classification mechanism reinforces the idea that skin color matters, and that, depending on the color and on the tone of the skin, one is granted more or less privileges and positioned at different levels in the social strata.

To this day, skin color – or skin tone – has been a particularly important factor in association with gender as a feature to evaluate African-American women. Because during slavery light-skinned female slaves worked in the house as maids doing what is traditionally considered womanly chores, having a lighter skin color is still associated with femininity. On the other hand, as Hill observes (2002: 79), darker female slaves were picked to work in the plantation fields, where they were required to work as much and as hard as men, and therefore darker skin is still associated with less feminine women.

Furthermore, African-American women who had lighter skin color and Caucasian features such as thin lips, narrow noses, or straight hair were perceived as more attractive and more beautiful than those who had darker skin color and African features, which is itself another manifestation of ethnocentrism. Standards of beauty vary depending on the period: although there are no clear-cut paradigms, a quick look at Hollywood's star system reveals that at times – for example in the 1920s or in the early 1970s – slim bodies with small breasts and narrow hips were the ideal of beauty, while at some other times – particularly in the 1940s and in the 1950s – curvaceous women with small waists, wide hips and big breasts were preferred. The only thing that has not change over the years, says Tracey O. Patton (2006: 31), is the attitude towards skin color, white is always preferred over black. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, visual artists such as African-American photographer Carrie Mae Weems started to question these beauty standards and to fight for and defend the image of the African-American woman. For example, in "Mirror, Mirror," from the 1987-1988 series *Ain't Jokin'*, a

black woman asks a mirror, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?” to which the magic mirror replies, “Snow White, you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!!”. Through this reference to the fairy tale *Snow White*, Weems reveals how traditional views of beauty and femininity are based on a racist dualism between white and non-white and, moreover, it discloses how these ideas are cruelly perpetuated through popular culture.

In the early years of cinema, this idea according to which light skin equals beauty and innocence while dark skin corresponds to unattractiveness and treachery was at the heart of the Hollywood film industry. Consequently, dark-skinned African-American women were given less good acting parts than light-skinned African-American women and they were often cast in more stereotypical roles. In his book *Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Donald Bogle makes a distinction between dark and light African-American actresses and claims that (1989: 15)

a dark black actress was considered for no role other than a Mammy or an Aunt Jemima. On the other hand, the part-black woman – the light-skinned negress – was given a chance at lead parts and was graced with a modicum of sex appeal [...] The mulatto came closer to the white ideal.

The cases of Hattie McDaniel and Dorothy Dandridge, for example, corroborate Bogle’s argument, but, as the careers of Viola Davis and Halle Berry demonstrate, contemporary Hollywood storytelling still relies on this dichotomy. For example Hattie McDaniel was the first African-American woman to win an Oscar award for Best Supporting Actress in 1939 for the role of Mammy in Victor Fleming’s *Gone with the Wind*. Although McDaniel appeared in more than 300 films, she was only credited in 80 films and she was often a background character in the mold of the Mammy, a subservient black stereotype that, as Bogle (1989: 9) and West (2008: 289) observe, was

always dark-skinned, unattractive, oversized and desexualized. Dorothy Dandridge, on the other hand, played leading roles in a period where race relations were especially problematic, and, in 1954, she was the first African-American to be nominated for Best Actress for her role in Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones*. She lost to Grace Kelly. Skin color and physical features were an important issue in Hollywood, even more so in the case of black actresses. According to Mia Mask (2009: 30), Dandridge "solidified a public persona of respectable, black bourgeois womanhood, feminine beauty, and domesticity." For Robert Lightning (1997: 48), she was "promoted as a sex goddess," but this was

not merely a matter of her being attractive but of the particular type of beauty she exhibits [...] the color coding of black women in films begins as early as *Birth*: the dark-skinned mammy is non-sexual and nurturing, the lighter-skinned Lydia passionate and sexual, and almost every black glamour star (however briefly) has been of the latter type: a black woman who also meets European standards of beauty.

These stereotypes made both Dandridge and McDaniel acceptable in white society by transforming difference into a simplistic paradigm that conforms to white standards and white racial hierarchies. That is, McDaniel's physique made her assimilable by white society as a submissive and caring nanny or maid, while Dandridge, who conformed to western standards of beauty, was often portrayed as an attractive but unthreatening sexualized woman – this was the case in films like, for example, the British thriller *Moment of Danger* (a.k.a *Malaga*) (Laslo Benedek, 1960), she even played the role of a European woman, or *Tamango* (John Berry, 1958), where she played the role of a slave called Aiche.

### **III. Blaxploitation and the redefinition of black stereotypes**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the film industry did not employ African-American actors and actresses; instead, black characters were played by white people in blackface, as in, for example, Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from 1903. However, as early as 1909, with the emergence of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), African-Americans grew increasingly aware of the ways the media portrayed them, and, for example, they attempted to mount boycott of films that contained racist content, such as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of the Nation* (1915) (Guerrero 1993: 14). In addition, the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s also led to the casting of more black actors and actresses in Hollywood films and to a more accurate and less stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans. A case in point is Sidney Poitier, who in 1963 became the first black actor to win the Oscar for a leading role. However, it was not until the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s that opportunities in the film industry actually grew for African-Americans both in front of and behind the camera and that the representation of blacks was tackled head-on.

The emergence of the Black Power Movement, the emphasis on racial pride and the development of political and cultural institutions to promote the education, the interests and the values of the African-American community not only helped to remove racial barriers but also contributed to a change in the way they were represented. As Margaret Hunter notes (2002: 187; 2007: 238), the Black Power Movement attempted to change the image of blacks as "otherness" or "wrongness" portrayed by Hollywood, and that associated "blackness" with primitiveness, ugliness, ignorance, irrationality and inferiority (as opposed to the ideals of intelligence, civility, rationality, beauty and superiority associated with "whiteness").

It was in this context that the cultural movement “Black is Beautiful” emerged in an attempt to eradicate the negative views of the black body, emphasizing the beauty of African-Americans’ natural features such as hair, skin color and facial features. So-called blaxploitation films rested on this cultural revalorization of blackness. As opposed to the racist images found in mainstream Hollywood films, these films emulated well-known genres to offer a black perspective. They not only became a vehicle for black performers and technicians but also gave a political slant to the problems faced by African-Americans. Their aim was to eradicate the black stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream, white culture. However, some of the films reinforced the negative view of African-Americans because blacks were not always in complete control of the film. As Daniel J. Leab (1975: 187-188) observes,

Direction [...] was usually in the hands of whites [...] Production and distribution were almost exclusively controlled by whites. And concerned as they were with making a profit, they gave little thought to changing the movie image of the black or of furthering his knowledge of film production.

With her afro hair and brown complexion, Pam Grier was one of the black actresses that helped to change people’s views on beauty and the black body. For the new generation of African-American actresses, it would have been difficult to be cast in the roles that Hollywood reserved for black women. The blaxploitation subgenre created the image of the independent, strong, self-confident and sexy black woman championed by actresses like Pam Grier, Gloria Hendry and Tamara Dobson. While only a few years before black women went through all kinds of harsh treatments to flatten their hair, actresses like Grier turned natural afro hair into an important symbol of black beauty that reflected the pride of their African ancestry and challenged white standards of beauty. It is no coincidence that, in his own autobiography, from 1964,

Malcolm X explicitly talks about being against hair straightening because it revealed the embarrassment of and detachment from black beauty while accepting white ideals (in Patton 2006: 29):

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endure all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are "inferior" — and white people "superior" —.

The "Black is Beautiful" movement became a powerful instrument in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge white standards of beauty. However, based on the images of blacks found in the mainstream cinema of the following decades, one cannot speak of a widespread success and, save for a few exceptions, racism still dominates the representation of black people. According to bell hooks (1996: 122), "Once again the fate of black folks rested with white power. If a black person wanted a job and found it easier to get it he or she did not wear a natural hairstyle, etc. this was perceived by many to be a legitimate reason to change."

However, Pam Grier did not only have an impact on concepts of black beauty, she also helped to change the roles African-American actresses played in Hollywood cinema. So far, there had been few leading roles for black actresses, who were condemned to play unattractive supportive roles and to remain in the background. Despite the fact that Grier was sexually objectified owing to her physical attractiveness and can be said to have contributed to the development of the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized black heroine, she was often cast as the leading actress, and gave voice to African-American women, who, until then, could only identify with white women or with voiceless and submissive secondary characters. In addition, it is important to note that Pam Grier's success coincided with the second wave of feminism, and the

combination of assertiveness and bold femaleness that characterized her roles found an exceptional resonance in United States society at the time. As Yvonne D. Sims points out (2006: 80), “In her films, Grier’s heroines redefined sexuality, womanhood, and beauty by portraying empowering, liberated, assertive heroines.” In brief, in the cultural context of the 1970s, actresses like Pam Grier not only helped to change the roles African-American actresses played in mainstream cinema, but also redefined the concepts of black femininity.

#### **IV. The new black wave**

Notwithstanding the abolition of slavery in 1865, the expansion of the so-called Jim Crow laws made the United States, a country divided between blacks and whites. Jim Crow laws were conceived of in the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) as a way of perpetuating racial segregation in public areas and services like transport, schools, restaurants, restroom, etc. Developed around boycotts, marches, sit-ins and nonviolent protests, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s contributed to the abolition of these prevailing forms of segregation. As Eric Foner (2010), for example, illustrates, the effort, the struggle, and the heavy toll of the Civil Rights movement eventually translated into the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Voting Rights Act (1965) and the Fair Housing Act (1968), which outlawed the various forms of discrimination based on race. However, although the new laws guaranteed equal rights for all people, different, more subtle forms of discrimination based on race and gender continued to tear United States society apart. The United States may have emerged from the 1970s as a more egalitarian, color-blind country, but the failure in the context of Ronald Reagan's deregularization of the economy to adopt affirmative action perpetuated the racial divide in many ways. White citizens may have believed that race, as Reagan claimed (in Chafe 1999: 480), was no longer an issue in the United States, but cases like the Rodney King's beating (and further acquittal of the aggressors) brought United State society face to face with the shifting nature of racism.

Cinema was one of the conduits through which the situation of the black community made itself felt in the 1980s and 1990s through a new wave of race-conscious films known as "New Jack Cinema" (Sung 2008: 255) that urged to see the forms of racial discrimination developed in the new contexts. This new black wave changed the attitudes of mainstream United States culture towards African-Americans



and their cultural expressions, which, in a sense, changed from oppression to consumption. Unlike the blaxploitation of the previous decade, the new wave of black cinema was made by black filmmakers both for black audiences and for the mainstream public. Film directors like Spike Lee, John Singleton, Forest Whitaker, Carl Franklin and Julie Dash, only to mention a few, and TV producers like Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg contributed significantly to change the image of black people in different ways. Likewise, mainstream Hollywood films would gradually offer a less prejudiced view of African-Americans. All things considered, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century United States cinema showed a wider acceptance and a less biased portrayal of the African-American community. However, racism not only persists in many films, but it has changed – or metamorphosed – depending on the social and political context. One of the ways in which racism manifests itself in contemporary cinema is in the manipulation of old stereotypes to portray African-American women. In what follows I briefly examine the characterization of and the role played by black actresses Halle Berry and Viola Davis in the films *Monster's Ball* and *The Help*, respectively. Both these films are from the noughties and both deal with the racial divide. *Monster's Ball* tells the story of a young black woman who starts a relationship with the white prison guard that executed her husband. The turbulent, interracial relationship between Leticia Musgrove (Halle Berry) and Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton) touches upon issues like miscegenation (which have rarely found a comfortable place in mainstream cinema) and the prospect of racial integration in a society still torn by racial prejudices. The last scene of the film seems to condense the conflicts and the contradictions that underlie the issue of race. Hank and Leticia are eating ice-cream on the front steps of their house when Hank says, "I think we're going to be all right." Yet, both Berry's performance and the editing of the scene, which establish both a separation and a hierarchy in their

relationship – inevitably link Leticia’s future with the racist past of the country and call into question Hank’s optimistic remark. In general, this open ending problematizes the possibility of blacks and whites living together. *The Help* also deals with the racist past of the country. It tells the story of a number of black maids during the Civil Rights era. Spectators are provided with the point of view of the maids and are made to sympathize with their plight. In a film like *Gone with the Wind*, in which Hattie McDaniel played the role of a housekeeper, she was happy to be a slave and contributed to put forward a positive view of slavery. In *The Help*, the character played by Viola Davis exposes the dark side of her subservient condition and the audience identify with her in a way they would not identify with McDaniel in the late 1930s. Both films deal openly with racism and place the spectator on the side of the African-American community. However, upon a closer look, their narrative structure and the casting of Halle Berry and Viola Davis reveal the changing structures of racism at the time.

## V. The case of Halle Berry

Halle Berry and Viola Davis have been coded according to long-standing historical notions of skin color as illustrated above. Halle Berry's lighter skin color and closeness to white standards of beauty and femininity have led both to her sexualization and to her casting in more neutral or less racialized roles. On the other hand, Viola Davis, due to her darker complexion and black features, has been cast in racialized and asexual roles. With this in mind, it is revealing to analyze the roles and the characterization of Halle Berry in films like *Monster's Ball*, *Swordfish* (Dominic Sena, 2001) or *Die Another Day* (Lee Tamahori, 2002). Her role of Leticia Musgrove in *Monster's Ball* is based on the historical black stereotype of the Jezebel, which is formed around sexuality and sexual promiscuity. Leticia's character as played by Halle Berry embodies all of these traits; she is portrayed as hyper-sexualized and with an animalistic appetite for sex, which is seen, for example, in the various sex scenes.

In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argued that Hollywood cinema deployed a voyeuristic male gaze that was projected onto the sexualized body of female characters. That is, the pleasure of looking the spectator derives from mainstream films reproduced the power relations of a patriarchal order where men subjugate women. According to Mulvey (1975: 4),

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionists role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease [...] she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.

Although Mulvey's argument has been qualified since it first appeared in 1975, this quote perfectly captures the overall characterization of Leticia in *Monster's Ball* and, in particular, the power dynamics of the various sex scenes. For example, when Hank performs oral sex on her, the spectacle of the gaze begins when the camera focuses solely on her for nearly forty seconds. The scene begins in a medium close-up and then tracks in on her when she is climaxing to capture a closer look of her facial expressions. Although the focus on her pleasure and the removal of Hank from the frame may elicit ambivalent if not contradictory messages that challenge simplistic notions of the relationship between gaze and patriarchy, in this scene Leticia exists for visual pleasure only, as an erotic object to be looked at, and spectators, regardless of gender, identify with the gaze projected on her body. There is another revealing (and contradictory) scene in *Monster's Ball* when Leticia and Hank have sex for the first time. The editing of this scene invites analysis of the relationships between framing and the gaze in the context of an interracial relationship. Although the scene contains nudity and is fairly explicit for a mainstream film, and although the distance of the camera places spectators in an anxiety-free voyeuristic position from which to project their desire onto the female body, framing and editing undermine the pleasure of looking without being seen. As Leticia and Hank begin kissing and undressing each other the film abandons the conventions we have come to expect. Jump cuts, partially repeated shots, out of focus images, changes in shot scale, and the crossing of the axis of action create a frantic rhythm that both captures their passion and prevents spectators from take pleasure in the spectacle of Berry's body. Besides, the composition of the frame, with oversized objects in the foreground and doors and furniture that confine the lovers to a narrow section of the screen also contribute to the alienation of the spectator, who may even feel weird witnessing this scene.

Another well-known example of how Berry's body has been sexualized and objectified is found in *Die Another Day*. In a scene reminiscent of Ursula Anders' famous coming out of the water in *Dr. No* (Terence Young, 1962), Halle Berry's characterization as Giacinta "Jinx" Johnson in the aforementioned James Bond movie relies on her objectification as an erotic woman to be looked at. The spectator sees Jinx come out of the water through the voyeuristic gaze of male icon James Bond and is thus required to take pleasure from a visual configuration that normalizes heterosexual desire and male dominance. When James Bond sees Jinx coming out of the water he looks at her through his binoculars, the spectator is granted a shot of Bond's point of view and asked to share in a male voyeuristic fantasy in which Berry's body is looked at without the anxiety of having the gaze returned by a woman. In other words, the spectator is forced to see Jinx literally through James Bond's eyes and share in the objectification entailed by his, male-coded voyeuristic position. In addition, Jinx is presented in slow-motion, which dehumanizes her and makes it easy for the spectator to look at and relish in every detail of her body.

The last example has been taken from the film *Swordfish* and is very similar to the one from *Die Another Day*. Again, Halle Berry, who plays Ginger Knowles in the film, is repeatedly the sexual object of the male gaze. On one occasion, Stanley Jobson (Hugh Jackman) looks at her behind a partially open door as she takes off her clothes. Although Berry's role borrows from female action heroines that can be said to go back to Pam Grier's 1970s persona and her powerlessness is open to discussion, the character, like Jinx in the scene from *Die Another Day*, does not know that she is being looked at, which makes her a overpowered character subjugated by a male look that the spectator can share in.

But Halle Berry is not simply a black woman that is coded as a sexual object along the lines of Hollywood mainstream cinema. During the noughties Berry has been increasingly characterized as sexual object and has been coded as more white than black. However, the course her career took at the time resonates with more profound gender and racial issues. The bi-racial relationship in *Monster's Ball*, the Academy Award she won in 2002, her casting as the first African-American Bond girl (a role that has come to embody the ideal of beauty during nearly five decades), and even subsequent roles like the popular comic heroine Catwoman, point to the contradictory situation of black women in United States society. On the one hand, she may be seen as a representative of progress achieved in terms of racial equality. On the other, the roles she has been cast in and the way she has been characterized reveal that this acceptance rests on new, subtle forms of discrimination. In other words, Berry is accepted by an inherently patriarchal (and sexist) institution like Hollywood to the extent that she is coded according to white standards of beauty (light skin, small and narrow nose, crop hair, lean body, slim hips and delicate cheekbones). As Margaret L. Hunter suggests (2007: 238-243), it is her characterization as white that makes Halle Berry more beautiful and more feminine, which in turn has led to her acceptance in Hollywood's white, patriarchal microcosm and in society at large.<sup>3</sup> The bi-racial relationships in *Die Another Day* and *Monster's Ball* are particularly revealing in this sense. One of the most entrenched taboos in United States society is challenged in these mainstream films (or made acceptable for society at large) precisely because the way Halle Berry is coded both as a sexy and unthreatening black woman.

---

<sup>3</sup> Similar arguments are put forward by Bertram D. Ashe (1995: 580, 585), Mark E. Hill (2002); Margo Okazawa-Rey et al. (1986: 93), Tracey Owens Patton (2006: 26-30) and Jalmeen K. Makkar and Michael J. Strube (1995: 1547-1550).

## VI. The case of Viola Davis

The representation of Halle Berry reveals both that the gains made by the different movements for equal rights are not sufficient and that racism cannot be isolated from other issues like gender. What I propose to do next is to examine the career of Viola Davis in an effort to better understand the subtle ways in which racism is perpetuated.

As I mentioned above, both Halle Berry and Viola Davis are of a similar age and both started their career at roughly the same time. However, Viola Davis looks very different and has been coded differently by the Hollywood industry. Her darker complexion, broader nose and wider hips correspond with widespread notions of blackness and motherhood, which seems to have limited the roles she is offered to racialized, asexual characters. Her features fit Patricia Hills Collins' description of black women. Black women, says Collins, have "dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (2014: 89). Likewise, Janice D. Hamlet (1998: 181) noted that black women have "[d]ark or medium-brown skin, short, curly/nappy black hair, thick noses and lips, full legs, full hips and full buttocks," and that these attributes are not the ideal of beauty for society or Hollywood.

These traits bring to mind the Mammy, a stereotype that was characterized by having dark skin color, being middle-aged and not particularly beautiful, and who, in addition, was submissive, obedient, loyal, happy and devoted to a white families for which she functioned as maternal figure and moral guide (West 2008: 289). This archetype emerged in the late 1860s and became very well-known with the rise of advertising in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (worthy of mention are the Aunt Jemima products) and, in particular, with Hattie McDaniel's role in *Gone with the Wind*. However, stereotypes are never consistent over time, they evolve and their meaning changes in a conversation with wider social and cultural changes: today the

portrayal of the Mammy archetype does not have the same traits or connotations that it had in the past. A look at contemporary cinema reveals that the old Mammy stereotype has evolved into other black types such the motherly figure, the friendly advisor or historical characters like maids or slaves. Nonetheless, some ideas still remain very deeply ingrained in society, for example the implications of unattractiveness, asexuality and subservience.

These archetypes are thus based on their distinctly black skin and features but also on their coding as asexual, motherly and unattractive women. They condense some of the values of racist and sexist western societies. As Clarence Johnson Shole notes (2005: 174), blackness has always been constructed as ugliness. Similarly, according to Susan E. Chase and Mary Frances Rogers (2001: 32), since the Victorian era motherhood entails that you are not a young girl anymore, but a mature woman, and that therefore you are no longer desirable. These, in brief, are the characteristics that underlie the roles played by Viola Davis as illustrated, for example, by her work in *Doubt* (John Patrick Shanley, 2008), *Eat Pray Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010) and *Beautiful Creatures* (Richard LaGravenese, 2013). In *Doubt*, Davis plays Mrs. Miller, a hard-working mother who tries to make a decent living and keep her family together, while, in *Eat Pray Love* and *Beautiful Creatures*, she plays the reliable confidant who offers advice to the white protagonist. Finally, in *The Help*, Viola Davis, together with renowned-African-American actress Octavia Spenser, plays a maid from Mississippi during the Civil Rights era.

Unlike Halle Berry, Davis has never won an Academy Award; she was nominated for her stereotypical role in *The Help* but lost to Meryl Streep. With the exception of her role as Aibileen Clark in *The Help*, Davis has always played secondary characters that remain in the background (and this cannot be said to be a customary



leading part either). But she is very aware of her public persona. In 2014 she said: “I have been given a lot of roles that are downtrodden, mammy-ish. A lot of lawyers or doctors who have names but absolutely no lives” (in Wallace 2014: 2). Although questions of women’s sex appeal are tricky territory, it is safe to say that the roles Viola Davis has played tend to understate her sexuality. Unlike Halle Berry, she usually wears baggy clothes with subdued colors and she never flaunts her body. For example, in *Doubt* she often wears an unappealing light brown coat that reaches below her knees, and in *The Help*, her clothes, once again, are plain with subdued colors (not to mention that she wears white stocking, which can be seen as an erasure of her ethnic identity at a time of rising racial conflicts). In addition, it is important to stress that although Davis is one of the main characters in the film (she, together with Octavia Spencer, is the most experienced of the leading actresses) we get to know her story thorough the point of view of Skeeter Phelan, a white, well-off girl from the old southern gentry that decides to write a book to tell the story of all the African-American maids of a Mississippi small town.

That same year she played the leading role in the TV series *How to Get Away with Murder* (Peter Nowalk, 2014) and the online magazine *The Wire* featured an interview where she made clear that contemporary films did not feature actresses that, like her, were “of color, of a certain age, and a certain hue” (in O’Keefe 2014: 1). If truth be told, *How to Get Away with Murder* seems to signal a shift in the career of Viola Davis. Apart from the notoriety she has achieved, the character she plays projects a very progressive image. She is in a relationship with a white professor of Phycology at Middletown University played by Tom Verica and has an extramarital love affair with a black detective played by Billy Brown. So this is not only the first time that Davis plays the role of a protagonist, but this is also the first time she plays a character involved in

an interracial relationship. It is worth pointing out that the show would have not been possible without the work of executive producer Shonda Rhimes, an African-American woman that promotes the work of black actresses and whose projects tend to feature interracial relationships – this is the case, for example of *Scandal* and *Grey's Anatomy*. In addition, in *How to Get Away with Murder*, Davis plays the leading role and she is characterized as a glamorous and even sexy criminal defense professor who wears tight, elegant clothes and stylish jewelry.

## **VII. Conclusion**

There is no doubt that skin color continues to play an important role both in Hollywood and in society at large, and, although there can be traced an evolution towards equality during the last decades, there is still a strong color bias that perpetuates white supremacy in different, more subtle ways that need to be examined. We live in a society where institutions are based on a color hierarchy, and this affects the African-American community in different ways. The lighter your complexion is, the better social position and economic status you will achieve. This is still an important issue for African-Americans. The gains achieved in some areas are plagued by new forms racism and Hollywood films reflect and reinforce them. The public persona and the career of black actresses are coded according to disparaging stereotypes that curtail the advancement of the African-American community. Although the panorama is certainly more complex than an essay such as this can reveal, the cases of Halle Berry and Viola Davis illustrate these mechanisms. The media feeds our culture with these ideas and promotes certain attitudes to race, gender and class. Race issues are not a matter of all or nothing – as Margaret L. Hunter illustrated (2002), having a lighter skin color grants black people more privileges in today's society – but research shows that being black still determines, the education you get, the income you will have and, judging from the recent cases of black men killed by police, your life expectancy.

## VIII. Works cited

- “2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script.” 2015. Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA . (February). <<http://www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2-25-15.pdf>>. Accessed May 10, 2015.
- Acampora, Christa Davis and Angela L. Cotton. 2007. *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Ashe, Bertram D. 1995. ““Why Don’t He Like My Hair?”: Constructing African-American Standards of Beauty in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*.” *African American Review* 29 (4): 579-592.
- Bogle, Donald. 2001. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Cahill, Ann J. 2012. *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics*. New York: Routledge.
- Chafe, William H. 1999. *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chase, Susan E. and Mary Frances Rogers. 2001. *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Christopherson, Susan. 2008. “Beyond the Self-Expressive Creative Worker: An Industry Perspective on Entertainment Media.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (7-8): 73-95.
- Coard, Stephanie Irby, Alfiee M. Breland and Patricia Raskin. 2001. “Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31 (11): 2256-2274.
- Collins, Patricia Hills. 2014. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Covington, Jeanette. 2010. *Crime and Racial Constructs: Cultural Misinformation about African Americans in Media and Academia*. Maryland: Lexington Books.

- Foner, Eric. 2010. *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Guerrero, Ed. 1993. *Framing Blackness, the African American Image in Film: From "Birth" to Blaxploitation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hamlet, Janice D. 1998. *Afrocentric Visions: Studies in Culture and Communication*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Hazzel, Vanesa and Juanne Clarke. 2008. "Race and Gender in the Media: A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Two Mainstream Black Magazines." *Journal of Black Studies* 39: 5-21.
- Hill, Mark E. 2002. "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65 (1): 77-91.
- hooks, bell. 1996. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hunter, Margaret L. 2002. "'If You're Light You're Alright': Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color." *Gender and Society* 16 (2): 175-193.
- Hunter, Margaret. 2007. "The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality." *Journal Compilation* 1 (1): 237-254.
- Johnson Shole, Clarence. 2005. "(Re)Conceptualizing Blackness and Making Race Obsolescent." In Yancy, G. (ed.) *White on White/Black on Black*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield: 173-202.
- Jones, Trina. 2000. "Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color." *Duke Law Journal* 49: 1487-1557.
- O'Keeffe, Kevin. 2014. "Viola Davis Gives Brutally Frank Interview About Race in Hollywood." <<http://www.thewire.com/entertainment/2014/09/viola-davis-gives-brutally-frank-interview-about-race-in-hollywood/380091/>> Accessed June 20, 2015.
- Leab, Daniel J. 1975. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Lightning, Robert K. 1997 "Dorothy Dandridge: Ruminations on Black Stardom." *Cineaction* 44: 32-39.

- Makkar, Jalmeen K. and Michael J. Strube. 1995. "Black Women's Self-Perceptions of Attractiveness Following Exposure to White Versus Black Beauty Standards: The Moderating Role of Racial Identity and Self-Esteem." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 25: 1547-1566.
- Manatu, Norma. 2002. *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema*. North Carolina: McFarland.
- Mask, Mia. 2009. *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." <<http://imlportfolio.usc.edu/ctcs505/mulveyVisualPleasureNarrativeCinema.pdf>>. Accessed May 8, 2015.
- Okazawa-Rey, Margo , Tracy, Robinson and Janie Victoria. Ward. 1986. "Black Women and the Politics of Skin Color and Hair." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 6: 89-102
- Patton, Tracey Owens. 2006. "Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair." *NWSA Journal* 18 (2): 24-51.
- Ramírez Berg, Charles. 2009. *Latino Images in Film. Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Sims, Yvonne D. 2006. *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture*. North Carolina: McFarland.
- Smith, Jason. 2013. "Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Contemporary Hollywood Films and Struggles over Racial Representation." *Journal of Black Studies* 44: 779-797.
- Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti and Katherine Pieper. 2014. "Race/Ethnicity in 600 Popular Films: Examining On Screen Portrayals and Behind the Camera Diversity." <[http://annenbergl.usc.edu/pages/~\\_/media/MDSCI/Racial%20Inequality%20in%200Film%202007-2013%20Final.ashx](http://annenbergl.usc.edu/pages/~_/media/MDSCI/Racial%20Inequality%20in%200Film%202007-2013%20Final.ashx)>. Accessed June 20, 2015.

- Sung, Wendy. 2008. "Mainstream African American Cinema: The Struggle for Black Images in Hollywood." In Boyd, T. (ed.) *African Americans and Popular Culture*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group: 245-272.
- Walker, Alice. 1983. "If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?" In Walker, A. (ed.) *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 290-312.
- Wallace, Amy. 2014. "Viola Davis as You've Never Seen Her Before: Leading Lady!" <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/viola-davis.html>>. Accessed June 20, 2015.
- West, Carolyn M. 2008. "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' toward the Images of Black Women." In Chrisler, J., C. Golden and P. Rozee (eds.) *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*. New York: McGraw Hill: 286-299.

## **IX. Films cited**

*Beautiful Creatures* (Richard LaGravenese, 2013)

*Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, 1954)

*Die Another Day* (Lee Tamahori, 2002)

*Doubt* (John Patrick Shanley, 2008)

*Dr. No* (Terence Young, 1962)

*Eat Pray Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010)

*Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939)

*Malaga* (László Benedek, 1960)

*Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001)

*Swordfish* (Dominic Sena, 2001)

*Tamango* (John Berry, 1958)

*The Birth of the Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915)

*The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011)